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SUBJECT: Venezuela and the Caribbean

¶1. Following is text of the editorial in today's Stabroek News newspaper, Guyana's leading independent newspaper. The editorial is a good reflection of the Guyanese thinking man's view of Venezuela, Chavez, and the 160 year-old boundary dispute.

¶2. BEGIN TEXT:

It was columnist Mr. Reggie Dumas writing in the Trinidad Express earlier this week who reminded readers of Dr Eric Williams's famous speech to the PNM in 1975 entitled 'The threat to the Caribbean Community.' In an address which sounds almost prophetic today, the late Prime Minister described Venezuela's Caribbean vision and ambitions as "starting off from barren, uninhabited rocks to a network of economic arrangements out of which is emerging a Venezuelan oil and industrial metropolis and an indebted Caribbean hinterland, the Caribbean as we know it integrated into Venezuela, the naval power of the future, the oil power of the present, the tourist mecca in the making, its position in its Venezuelan Sea fortified by its 200-mile exclusive economic zone: all to the plaudits of the Caribbean people themselves, with Trinidad and Tobago the odd man out."

There should be one qualification to this assessment. At the time when Eric Williams said it, Trinidad and Tobago was not the only odd man out; Guyana too was not in any doubt about Venezuela's strategic objectives. The issue is, has anything changed in Venezuela since that time to cause one to conclude that Dr Williams's views no longer have applicability? Certainly, where internal politics are concerned, President Hugo Chavez has brought a revolutionary style to government in Caracas; but what about foreign policy?

Where Guyana specifically is concerned, prior to his accession to office President Chavez's pronouncements on the border controversy were the most hawkish since the days of President Herrera Campins in the early 1980s. Things did not improve after he became head of state. President Jagdeo landed up at a South American leaders' summit in Brasilia, for example, to find his Venezuelan counterpart in full swing with maps pinned up and pointer in hand belabouring the international media on the subject of Venezuela's claim. On October 3, 1999, the one hundredth anniversary of the Paris award, Mr. Chavez - among other things - sent his warplanes to violate Guyana's airspace, his officials proffering some ludicrous excuse for the occurrence.

And then there was the case of the Beal spaceport proposal, which was to be sited in the Waini and which Miraflores vigorously opposed. Exactly how significant that opposition was in helping to scuttle the deal, we shall probably never know; however, in the case of the oil companies which were granted exploratory concessions in Essequibo waters by the Guyana Government, the situation is much clearer. Those which

were already working fields in Venezuela itself were left in no doubt that if they did not relinquish their Guyanese licences, it would have an impact on their Venezuelan investments.

And then two years ago President Chavez breezed into Georgetown for a 'love-fest,' all bonhomie, charm and seeming generosity. He was thinking roads, not invasion, he told a receptive Government of Guyana, and suggested he might be open to allowing Essequibo to develop its resources. Since then we have had PetroCaribe, more talk of a road linking Caracas and Georgetown, and Mr. Chavez's version of the Guyana Shield Project. So exactly which Hugo Chavez is the real one?

On the matter of boundaries, it must be noted that the government of our neighbour to the west has not seen fit to withdraw its spurious claim to three-fifths of our land; and while it might be argued that no Venezuelan head of state could suddenly announce such a dramatic turnabout one bright morning and still survive, one would expect a softening of approach. But where allowing us free rein to develop our Essequibo resources is concerned, then Foreign Minister Roy Chaderton explained to the press following President Chavez's visit here that things which would help communities develop, such as water, agricultural programmes or electricity, would not be opposed, but Venezuela would not tolerate any multinationals developing hydrocarbon reserves, for example, in Essequibo.

As for the first-named, Caracas has never opposed electrification or water projects at the village level (large hydropower schemes were a different matter), and where the second is concerned, if our neighbour dictates what kind of

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company can operate in our territory, exactly what has changed? In this instance, Miraflores knows well that we have no state entity capable of developing an oil and gas industry, so is this just creating a possible opening to bring in PdVSA to assist in due course, and perhaps reintroduce a state capitalist element back into Guyana? And make no mistake, PdVSA is not as autonomous as it was; it is now an instrument of President Chavez's social and political policies.

And there has been no change in Venezuela's irredentist behaviour in relation to other Caribbean territories either. President Chavez has been even more diligent in preferring his country's claim to Bird Rock, for example, than were his predecessors. Never mind that if that were declared to be Venezuelan, several of our Caricom sister territories would lose their EEZ. So much for Caracas's vaunted concern for the poor and under-privileged. And it was Mr. Dumas who pointed out that Venezuela still had not abandoned its claim either to the Trinidadian islands of Monos, Huevos and Chacachacare.

And then we have PetroCaribe. Mr. Dumas, with the clinical approach of someone whose country simply does not need Venezuela's oil, has drawn attention to the small print. He quotes the agreement, which says, "[w]ithin the framework of PetroCaribe, state bodies shall be required to implement energy-related operations. Venezuela offers technical cooperation to support the creation of state agencies in countries not possessing qualified state institutions for this purpose." In addition, he says, the PetroCaribe Secretariat would be "assigned to the [Venezuelan] Ministry

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of Energy and Petroleum" for the purposes of the day-to-day administration of the programme. In other words, as he observes, despite Caricom's commitment to the private sector's role, the signatories to PetroCaribe have now "opted for a reversion to statism..."

As for the much-touted road from Caracas to Georgetown, it would simply bring the North-West District and coastal Guyana within the Venezuelan sphere, while the Guyana Shield Project was originally envisaged as achieving the economic integration of the area between the Orinoco and Amazon Rivers, but as amended by President Chavez, significantly, it now omits Brazilian Guiana. The Government of Guyana has never even had the courtesy to open up the serious implications of such a project for public discussion.

So then, has President Chavez changed? The short answer is, only his methods. He has been open enough to tell the world what he seeks: a socialist universe, the elimination of US influence on the continent and the integration of South America and the Caribbean under his socialist Bolivarian Alternative - for which one can read Venezuelan hegemony. It was reported yesterday that he had said he was "ready to programme a new Mercosur" far from the currents of neo-liberalism, and that he was withdrawing from the Andean pact because of the recent trade agreements made by Peru and Colombia with the United States.

It is alleged he has used oil money to interfere in the politics of various South American countries, and only yesterday too, the Peruvian Association of Exporters accused him of funding a campaign against their country's free trade agreement with the United States. Angered by US naval exercises in the Caribbean he has announced his own naval manoeuvres off his coast.

President Chavez will run up against all kinds of impediments to the implementation of his vision in the case of several of the larger Latin countries, who among other things, have their own international ambitions, but he is off to a flying start in the Caribbean and Guyana. Of course he doesn't need to send his warplanes to violate our airspace, when he can integrate a large part of our territory, and that of our neighbours within the Venezuelan sphere by blandishments and oil payment concessions. And all this "to the plaudits of the Caribbean people," as Eric Williams put it.

END TEXT.

THOMAS